

## 27. Women's Institute

*In this response, Dr Rosemary Shirley tells the story of a local Women's Institute banner, which was produced in around 1951. She uses this object as a way to explore and consider the changing role of the National Federation Women's Institute throughout the twentieth century, and the complex part this durable organisation has played in the social, cultural, political, and creative development of English rural life since its establishment in 1915.*

### Pinkneys Green WI, Women's Institute Banner, circa 1951



The embroidered and hand-stitched decorative front of the Pinkneys Green Women's Institute Banner, as shown suspended from the original display pole (MERL 2007/48/1-2).

If I said: "Think of the Women's Institute," what would come to mind? Perhaps you're thinking of *Calendar Girls*, the smash hit film and stage musical telling the story of real life WI members, who famously created a naked calendar to raise funds to support Leukaemia research. Or, you may be thinking of the phrase "Jam and Jerusalem", which is often used as a disparaging short hand for the organisation, derived from its history of organising a massive food preservation drive during the Second World War, together with the name of the hymn adopted as the Institute's anthem. Alternatively, it's possible the WI simply brings to mind older, white, middle class ladies, drinking tea and gossiping, maybe wearing hats.

All these images might represent some element of the organisation, but none of them tell the whole story of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) drive to educate, empower, entertain, and connect rural women since 1915.

I'm delighted that this WI banner is included in the Museum of English Rural Life's collection of 51 voices | 51 Objects, as it helps us to understand more about the history of this fascinating movement and the women who made, and continue to make it work.

The banner represents Pinkneys Green Women's Institute. Pinkneys Green is a semi-rural village about two miles outside the town of Maidenhead in Berkshire. It derives its name from a Norman knight named Ghilo de Pinkney, who was granted lands in the area as a reward for supporting William the Conqueror.

These banners are used by institutes as a mark of shared identity. They often hang in WI meeting places, they are used in parades, and displayed when different WIs come together for large meetings or events. For example, WI banners were used in large numbers during a recent gathering of the Cornish Women's Institutes.

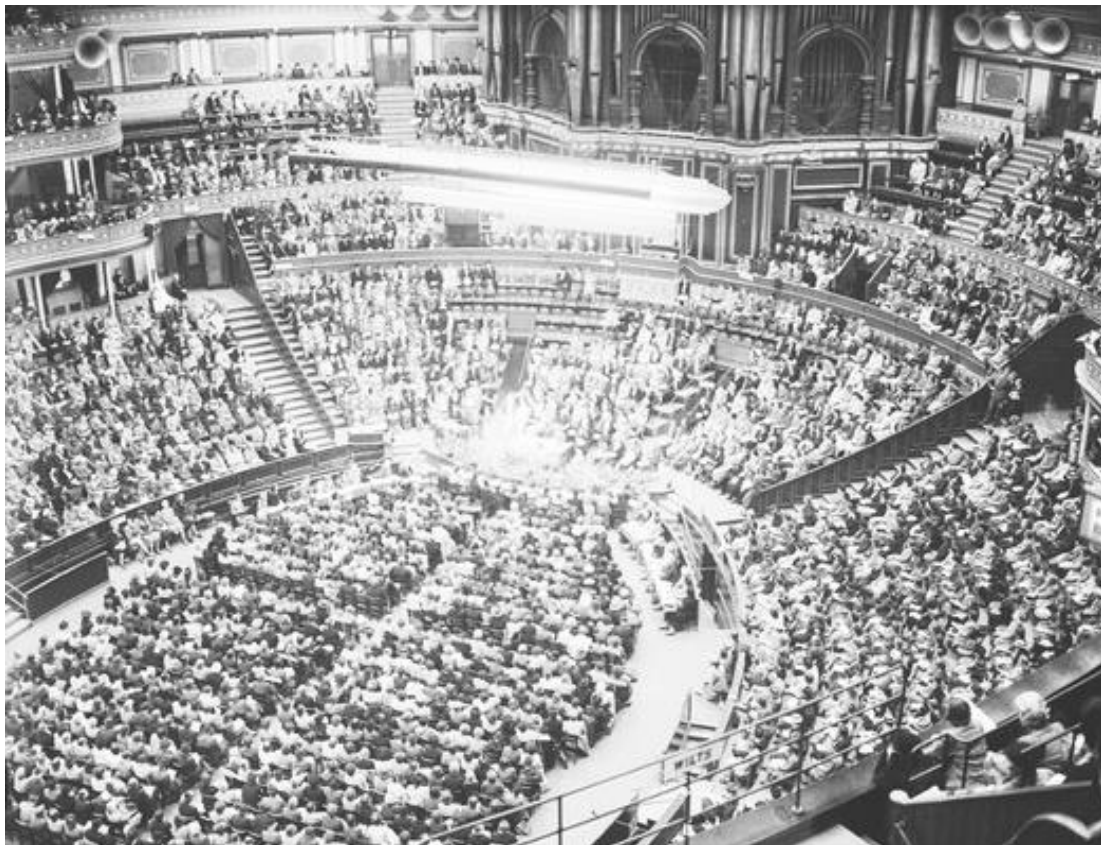


Detail showing the Pinkneys Green pond, with trees, reeds, and the sun behind (MERL 2007/48/1-2).

The Pinkneys Green banner has a central embroidered design depicting a pond with water reeds and the sun either rising or setting behind it. Beneath this is the name of the village and the WI logo of the time, flanked by embroidered oak leaves with acorns, this motif is also replicated in two appliqued oak springs in the top corners of the banner and mirrored in the two prominent trees in the picture, giving the overall design a pleasing symmetry. The use of embroidery on the central image is accomplished and it's worth spending some time looking closely. The stitches are like brush marks, and are used to create splashes of many different colours to represent the reflections on the surface

of the pond. There are even flashes of gold where the sunlight hits the clouds. Varying the direction of the stitches gives solidity to the tree trunks and brings a feeling of gentle movement to the leaves. Details like the small white bollards linked by chains at the edge of the pond, are not only well observed and then rendered in stitch, they let us know that this is a specific place rather than an imagined ideal view. It tells us that this place was very familiar to the person who made it, and indeed, inspection of the object records tells us that this was the view outside the home of its maker, Mrs Harvey.

Mrs Harvey was a founding member of the Pinkneys Green WI in 1949. This was a great period of expansion for the WI; between 1948 and 1949 the membership of the organisation increased by over forty-thousand, leading to the foundation of many new institutes, of which Pinkneys Green was one.<sup>1</sup> Over the next decade: the 1950s, the WI was to see its most popular period, with over half a million women joining seven thousand Women's Institutes.<sup>2</sup>



The Women's Institute general meeting in London's Albert Hall, April 1948 (MERL P FS PH1/K35199).

One reason for this increase in popularity was the heightened visibility of the movement in the years following the Second World War. During the war the WI famously organised the jam making Produce Guild, in the post war years it built on this legacy, responding to continued rationing and food shortages with Operation Produce. This tasked each WI member with producing ten pounds of extra food per year. The challenge was met with enthusiasm and the results were celebrated in a London

exhibition attracting thousands of visitors. This success led to more high profile events including a concert of WI choirs at the Royal Albert Hall singing specially commissioned music by Ralph Vaughan Williams, and a craft exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>3</sup> The WI also contributed to the 1951 Festival of Britain where members worked alongside Goldsmiths students on a large scale textile mural designed by the renowned textile artist and embroiderer Constance Howard. The mural, called *The Country Wife*, was displayed in the Country Pavilion on the festival site. At the mural's centre is the interior of a village hall filled with women engaged in many activities that have come to be associated with the WI like knitting, baking, sewing and embroidery. The mural is now in the care of the National Needlework Archive where it is available for viewing by the public.

Another reason for the dramatic rise in membership of the WI during this period was the increase of middle class families choosing to make their homes in the countryside. The post war era saw a great improvement in standards of living in rural areas. Widespread infrastructure projects such as the installation of water and sewage mains, electricity and telephones, were making villages much more appealing places to live. This was especially true in the Home Counties, which is of course where Pinkneys Green is located.



Detail showing the needlework oak leaves and acorn motif, the oak being a symbol of Englishness, tradition, and solidarity (MERL 2007/48/1 -2).

This middle class influx changed the demographic of the WI, and to some extent the focus of its activities. As did the return to domesticity for women, who during the war had had the opportunity to take on a wide range of roles outside the home. The NFWI had its origins in campaigning for women's rights and on issues specifically affecting the lives of women. These activities remained central to the WI during the 1950s but certainly became less visible in the content of meetings and in

the movement's magazine *Home and Country*, which replaced its reports on parliamentary bills with features on consumer goods and fashion.<sup>4</sup>

The WI has always had to navigate a difficult line between its role as a social community for rural women and a national campaigning organisation. It worries, often rightly, that members who value the lessons in flower arranging and crafting activities, the chat and the cup of tea, are bored by or even hostile towards the more political aspects of the organisation.

However, in her brilliant book about the WI: *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, Maggie Andrews helps us to see that these positions: the social and the political, are not in opposition to each other and that the WI's role in bringing potentially isolated rural women together, creating a national network of these women, and environment where their interests and skills are shared and valued is in fact an important radical act.

A vivid example of the WI creating the conditions where friendships can be made, confidence built, and skills and knowledge shared was the founding of Denman College in 1948. This was the WI's residential college in Warwickshire, here members could escape the family home for up to four days and take courses in subjects like embroidery, local history, cookery, art, astronomy, and current affairs. It was initially criticised as being something that only members of 'a certain class' could take advantage of, and as an extravagance in which conscientious wives and mothers should not indulge.<sup>5</sup> The class issue was partly addressed by the creation of bursaries, funded by individual institutes and drawn by lot. Sadly, Denman closed its doors in July 2020 but continues to offer a range of online courses in the spirit of its original vision, with crafts like embroidery very much at its core.

Recently, crafting of all kinds has seen a reinvigoration, perhaps most visibly on *Instagram* and *YouTube* where new communities of knitters and sewists share their considerable skills together with their pleasure in making. The potential of crafting as a radical act has also resurfaced, albeit it in a different way from the WI's approach, in movements like craftivism and feminist embroidery.

The WI continues to flex and evolve with its membership. The NFWI proudly claims to 'offer all kinds of opportunities to all kinds of women', and in recent years new Institutes have formed in urban areas encouraging a younger and perhaps more diverse membership. As part of my research for this piece I was cheered to see the NFWI contributions to the *Deeds Not Words 100 Banners* project, commemorating the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave some women the right to vote. The array of resulting banners amassed on the steps outside the Albert Hall vividly illustrating that banner making, skills like embroidery and the empowerment of women are still important in today's NFWI.

## Further Information (online):

For more information about the Pinkneys Green banner and other WI banners held at The MERL see – [MERL 2007/45-48, 2018/2-4, and MERL Library Oversize 7800-WRI](#)

For recent images of WI banners in use by the Cornish Women's Institutes see – <http://cornwallwi.org.uk/a-banner-day-for-the-wi-in-cornwall>

For more information about The Country Wife mural at the National Needlework Archive see – <https://www.nationalneedleworkarchive.org.uk/country-wife-mural.html>

For further information about WI Deeds Not Words 100 Banners projects see – <https://www.facebook.com/thewi/posts/today-representatives-from-the-wis-who-took-part-in-digital-dramas-deeds-not-wor/10155492674311139/>

For more information about Craftivism see – <https://craftivism.com/>

## Further Reading (some available online):

Grayson, Katherine. 'The Art of Embroidery: Why a traditional 'woman's craft' became a popular form of feminist expression' <https://harpymagazine.com/home-1/2021/4/7/the-art-of-embroidery-feminist-expression>

Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984)

Shirley, Rosemary. *Rural Modernity, Everyday Life and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018)

Summers, Julie. *Jambusters: The Story of the Women's Institute in the Second World War* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2013)

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Robinson *A Force to be Reckoned With* (London: Virago, 2011), p.181.

<sup>2</sup> Maggie Andrews *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's institute as a Social Movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997) p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, p.177-181.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, p.146

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, p.205. 210